Behind the inspirational poem "If—" lies the story of a father's love and a son's sacrifice

"You'll Be a Man, My Son!"

By Suzanne Chazin

The rumpled, brown-paper package was addressed simply to "Monsieur Kipling." Rudyard Kipling, celebrated British author and Nobel Prize-winner, opened it, his curiosity piqued by the painstaking scrawl. Inside was a red box containing a French translation of his novel *Kim* — pierced by a bullet hole that stopped at the last 20 pages. Through the hole, tied with string, dangled the Maltese Cross of the Croix de Guerre, France's medal for bravery in war.

The book had been sent by a young French soldier, Maurice Hamonneau. He explained in a letter that had *Kim* not been in his pocket when he went into battle, he would have been killed. Hamonneau asked Kipling to accept the book and medal as a token of gratitude.

Kipling felt more moved than he had been by any other honour he'd received. Through him, God had spared the life of this soldier. If only he had spared the life of another — one who meant more to Kipling than all the honours in the world.

Twenty-one years before, in 1897, Kipling's American wife, Carrie, bore their third child. The Kiplings already had two daughters, Josephine and Elsie, whom Rudyard adored. He hoped for a boy this time. He would always remember the moment that high-pitched squeal rang out. "Mr Kipling," the doctor called, "you have a son!"

Soon Kipling was gazing at an almost-four-kilogram, swaddled bundle. He cradled the warm, yawning infant in his arms, and a yearning rose within him more profound than any he had ever known.

John Kipling, as they named the boy, turned out to be a bright, cheerful and uncomplaining child. Kipling

felt blessed. But in 1899, tragedy struck.

On a trip to the United States, Rudyard and his older daughter, six-year-old Josephine, became ill with pneumonia. Before antibiotics, there was little doctors could do. On March 4, Kipling, desperately weak, finally pulled himself out of his delirium. Two days later, Josephine died.

Kipling could no longer bring himself to look at pictures of Josephine or hear her name mentioned. But he had to put aside his grief for the sake of three-year-old Elsie and 19-month-old John.

He took the children for picnics on the hilly Sussex Downs. He built a sandpit for them. When it came to playing with them, no game was too outlandish.

Kipling's fondest memories of those early years were the winters between 1900 and 1907, which the family spent near Cape Town. On hot afternoons, Kipling would lie in a hammock in the shade of a huge oak tree, his children close by. "Daddo," John may have asked one such time, "why do leopards have spots?"

No doubt a sparkle came to Kipling's eyes. The leopard, he began, mimicking the voice of an ancient sage, had long ago been sandy-brown in colour, as were the zebra and giraffe and he hunted on the open savannas. But then, to foil the leopard, the zebra and giraffe hid in the forests.

"After a long time," Kipling continued, "what with standing half in the shade and half out of it, the giraffe grew blotchy, and the zebra grew stripy." The leopard, in order to hunt his new prey in the forest, needed to change too, explained Kipling, so he chose spots. "Now and then you will hear grownups ask, 'Can a leopard change his spots?' "Kipling winked at his children and shook his head no. "He is quite contented as he is."

Kipling collected his fantastical tales about wildlife into a book called *Just So Stories*. In 1902, the book was published to critical acclaim. He was fast becoming a favourite author of children around the world. Few would have guessed that the man who so loved the magic and mystery of childhood had had such an unhappy one himself.

BORN IN Bombay, India, in 1865, Rudyard Kipling first glimpsed the world through the bustling street life of India. But before he turned six, he and his younger sister Trix were shipped off to England to attend school. The woman paid to board them beat and taunted the small, frail Rudyard, and censored the children's letters home. Often she would lock him in a cold, damp cellar for hours.

Despite all the abuse, young Kipling willed himself to remain cheerful. Years later, he wrote that the experience "drained me of any capacity for real, personal hate for the rest of my days." It also made him all the more determined to give

his own children the happiness, love and security he had lacked.

Kipling returned to India to become a newspaper reporter, and wrote fiction in his spare time. His plots dealt with the courage, sacrifice and discipline he saw in British servicemen stationed there, as well as with the mystery and danger of India. He collected his popular stories into short books, hoping to find a market in London.

Editors there derided his work. One wrote: "I would hazard a guess that the writer is very young, and that he will die mad before he has

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN THOMPSON

reached the age of 30." Kipling ignored the criticism and continued to write. In time, as his books gained popularity with readers, he became sought after by famous writers, academics and politicians. Kipling, however, was as indifferent to the praise as he had been to the earlier criticism.

By the early 1900s, Kipling was predicting war with Germany and calling for compulsory military service. For this he was frequently mocked by critics as an "imperialist" and a "jingoist." Even though he was increasingly scorned by the thinkers of the day, Kipling stood firm in his views and drew strength from his home and family.

If–

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: `Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

His son John was growing tall and handsome. Though not a skilled athlete, John loved competing in sports at his boarding school. How Kipling loved to watch his son, radiant with enthusiasm, dashing across the rugby field. How proud Kipling was — not because John was a great athlete but because he showed the quiet spunk and good humour that the father admired. John congratulated team-mates and opponents on their efforts. He never bragged about a win or whined about a loss. If he broke a school

Quotable Quotes

THE FINAL tragedy about violence as a strategy is that those who rely on it become immune to reason and the weight of factual evidence against its use. – F. van Zyl Slabbert, *The Last White Parliament*, quoted in *A Treasury of Quotations*

WE MUST teach our children to dream with their eyes open.
– Harry Edwards, quoted by Dennis Wyss in *Time*

ALWAYS do what you say you are going to do. It is the glue and fibre that binds successful relationships. – Jeffry Timmons, *The Entrepreneurial Mind*

BE CAREFUL going in search of adventure — it's ridiculously easy to find. – William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*

ONLY WHEN a tree has fallen can you take the measure of it. It is the same with a man. – Anne Morrow Lindbergh

TODAY'S opportunities erase yesterday's failures.
– Gene Brown in *News-Times*, Connecticut

WE OUGHT to be careful not to do for a fellow what we only intended to help him do. – Frank Clark, Al Smith Feature Service

ANY CONCERN too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden. – Corrie ten Boom, *Clippings From My Notebook*

IF YOU'RE going to be able to look back on something and laugh about it, you might as well laugh about it now.
– Marie Osmond, quoted by Jeanne Wolf in *Redbook*

GREED is envy with its sleeves rolled up. – George Will, Washington Post Writers Group

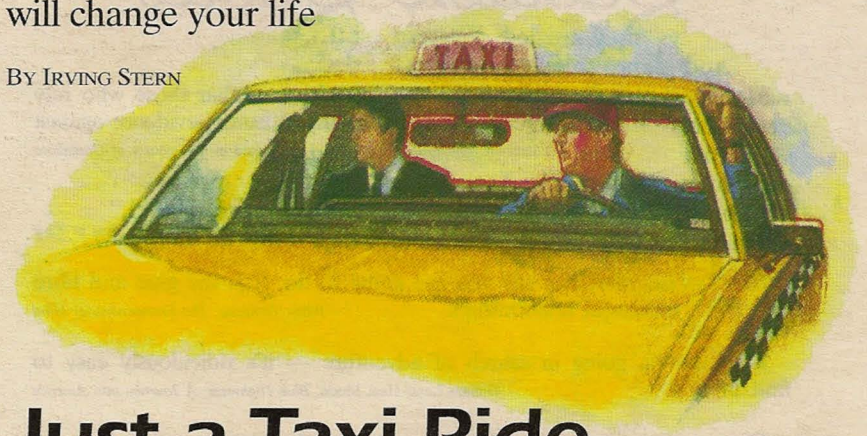
THE ONLY way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like, and do what you'd rather not. – Mark Twain

BABIES are always more trouble than you thought — and more wonderful. – Charles Osgood, CBS Morning News

A MASTER can tell you what he expects of you. A teacher, though, awakens your own expectations.
– Patricia Neal with Richard DeNeut, *As I Am: An Autobiography*

You never know when a chance encounter will change your life

By Irving Stern



Just a Taxi Ride

For 28 years, three months and 12 days I drove a New York City taxi. Now if you were to ask me what I had for breakfast yesterday, I probably couldn't tell you. But the memory of one fare is so vivid I'll remember it all my days in this world.

It was a sunny Monday morning in the spring of 1966. I was cruising down York Avenue looking for a customer, but with the beautiful weather business was kind of slow. I had stopped at a traffic light at 68th Street, just opposite New York Hospital, when I spied a well-dressed man dashing down the hospital steps. He was hailing me.

Just then, the light turned green, the driver behind me hooted impatiently, and I heard a cop's whistle. But I wasn't about to lose this ride. Finally the man reached the cab and jumped in. "La Guardia Airport, please," he said. "And thanks for waiting."

Good news, I thought. On Monday mornings, La Guardia is hopping, and with a little luck I could get a back-to-back fare. That would make my day.

As always, I wondered about my passenger. Was this guy a talker, a mummy, a newspaper reader? After a few moments, he started a conversation. It began ordinarily enough: "How do you like driving a taxi?"

It was a stock question, and I gave him my stock answer. "It's OK," I said. "I make a living and meet interesting people sometimes.

ILLUSTRATION: RICK MCCOLLUM

But if I could get a job making 100 dollars a week more, I'd take it — just like you would."

His reply intrigued me. "I wouldn't change jobs if I had to take a cut of a hundred a week."

I'd never heard anyone say such a thing. "What do you do?"

"I'm in the neurology department at New York Hospital."

Now I've always been curious about people, and I've tried to learn what I could from them. Many times on a long ride, I developed a rapport with my riders — and quite often received very good advice from accountants, lawyers, plumbers. Maybe it was that this fellow clearly loved his work; maybe it was just the pleasant mood of a spring morning. But I decided to ask for his help. We were not far from the airport now, and I plunged ahead.

"Could I ask a big favour of you?" He didn't answer. "I have a son, 15, a good kid. He's doing well in school. He wants a job for the summer. Now a 15-year-old can't get hired unless his old man knows someone who owns a business — and I don't." I paused. "Is there any possibility that you might get him some kind of a summer job — even if he doesn't get paid?"

He still wasn't talking, and I was starting to feel foolish for bringing up the subject. Finally, at the ramp to the terminals, he said, "Well, the medical students have a summer research project. Maybe he could fit in. Have him send me his school record."

He fished around in his pocket for a card but couldn't find one. "Do you have any paper?" he asked.

I tore off a piece of my brown lunch bag, and he scribbled something and paid me. It was the last time I ever saw him.

That evening, around the dining-room table with my family, I pulled the scrap from my shirt pocket. "Robbie," I announced proudly, "this could be a summer job for you." He read it out loud: "Fred Plum, New York Hospital"

My wife: "Is he a doctor?"

My son: "Is this a joke?"

After I nagged, cajoled, yelled and finally threatened to cut off his allowance, Robbie sent off his results the next morning.

Two weeks later when I arrived home from work, my son was beaming. He handed me a letter addressed to him on richly embossed paper. The letterhead read: "Fred Plum, M.D., Neurologist-in-Chief, New York Hospital." He was to call Dr Plum's secretary for an interview.

Robbie got the job. After working two weeks as a volunteer, he was paid 40 dollars a week for the rest of the summer. The white lab coat he wore made him feel a lot more important than he really was as he followed Dr Plum around the hospital, doing minor tasks for him.

The following summer, he worked at the hospital again, but this time he was given more responsibility. As the end of his high-school years

neared, Dr Plum was kind enough to write letters of recommendation for university. Much to our delight, Robbie was accepted at Brown University.

He worked at the hospital a third summer and gradually developed a love of the medical profession. When university graduation approached, he applied to medical school, and Dr Plum again wrote letters attesting to his ability and character.

Robbie was admitted to New York Medical University and, after getting his M.D., did a four-year residency specializing in obstetrics and gynaecology.

Dr Robert Stern, the taxi driver's son, became the obstetrics chief resident at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Centre in New York City. He is now in private practice.

Some might call it fate, and I guess it was. But it shows you, big opportunities can come out of ordinary encounters — even something as ordinary as a taxi ride.

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Marital Arts

ABSORBED in his reading, my husband can be oblivious to everything else. One night I felt especially neglected. He had asked me to bring his book when I came to bed, so I decided to get into my most revealing negligee to see his reaction. As I walked into the bedroom with the book tucked under my arm, he exclaimed, "Oh, no! You've lost my place."

– Virginia Sturdivant

MY HUSBAND has an annoying habit of searching through the refrigerator for a snack, usually while I'm preparing a meal. Once, after he had gone through this routine for the third time in as many minutes, I snapped, "Nothing's any different than it was a minute ago."

"I know that," he assured me. "It's just that this time I've lowered my standards."

– L. H.

SOME YEARS ago when my husband and I married, my teenage nephew, unbeknown to us, decorated our car. The morning after the wedding, when our car was brought around to us in front of our plush hotel, we were amused to discover a huge cardboard sign tied to the trunk that read "Just Marred."

– I.E.B.

AS OUR thirteenth wedding anniversary approached, we received a congratulatory card, which our nine-year-old decided to read to us. Misinterpreting the elaborate script, he wished us an enthusiastic "Happy Adversity!"

– Nancy Schmalz